

Balancing Readability and Reading Fluency | On Common Core

<http://www.slj.com/2013/03/standards/common-core/readability-and-reading-fluency-students-need-to-enjoy-what-they-choose-for-independent-reading-on-common-core/>

March 13, 2013

As states from Maine to Montana implemented the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the readability recommendations shocked those teachers who find that their students already struggle to read classroom material.

But, when the crafters of the CCSS came out with “readability” recommendations (Lexile Measures), they did not arbitrarily say, “Kids can’t read. Let’s make it more difficult for them.” Knowing the research behind text complexity is critical to understanding the call for more complexity. The CCSS crafters examined college freshman textbooks and career manuals. These texts typically measure at a Lexile score of 1450. This Lexile measure was used as a benchmark for college and career readiness (CCR). Grade level Lexiles were then scaffolded in reverse, defining grade level Lexile expectations as stated in the Common Core Appendix A.

You may not agree with this direction, but those who create assessments have already increased the reading difficulty on state tests. Students should not see difficult material for the first time on these tests. They have to be prepared to closely read, examine, decode, and digest material that is not within their “fluency” or comfort range.

In August 2012, the CCSSO team (Council of Chief State School Officers) revised Appendix A to approve five additional readability measures. Other “readability” formulas such as ATOS and the Flesch–Kincaid measure within Microsoft Word are now valid as well. These apply a mathematical measure to a linguistic product and are flawed—but they cannot be ignored.

Educators across America know that our transliterate learners have eyes that gravitate to pictures over text, skim and scan Web pages at warp speed, and lack the determination to read difficult material. That is problematic for close reading. Consider this passage from Appendix A (p.4):

Moreover, current trends suggest that if students cannot read challenging texts with understanding—if they have not developed the skill, concentration, and stamina to read such texts—they will read less in general. In particular, if students cannot read complex expository text to gain information, they will likely turn to text-free or text-light sources, such as videos, podcasts, and tweets. These sources, while not without value, cannot capture the nuance, subtlety, depth, or breadth of ideas developed through complex text.

They did not have to say “if.” The triage for our transliterate generation will be

embracing complex text and close reading. Two important tactics that will help teachers get there are purposeful reading and tactile reading.

Purposeful reading requires that teachers give students a reason to read. For instance, suggest that they read a passage “as though you were a king” or “as though you were a serf.” Then ask what part of the passage they pay attention to and for them to show evidence in the text that will support the particular point of view.

Tactile reading is reading with a twist. In the New York State training last month, the phrase drilled into turnkey trainers was “read with a pencil”—what we all did in our print textbooks in college. Close reading requires students to jot notes in the margin, write the gist of the text, and make notations. Closely read passages will be copied, distributed, written upon, digested, discussed, and debated. In digital formats, iPads with apps such as iAnnotate will become increasingly popular to give students the ability to read and react to the text.

Why fluency is important

As great as close reading of complex text may be for instruction, we should not measure independent reading. Also from Appendix A (p.4):

Students need opportunities to stretch their reading abilities but also to experience the satisfaction and pleasure of easy, fluent reading within them, both of which the Standards allow for.... Students deeply interested in a given topic, for example, may engage with texts on that subject across a range of complexity.

Many schools are disregarding reading for pleasure. This illustrates a gross misunderstanding of the goals of CCSS. It is in reading easy material that a student enjoys a book and builds fluency. Dare I suggest that everyone have this paragraph from Appendix A ready for the debates that ensue? For independent reading recommendations, students need to read and enjoy whatever they choose, at whatever level for independent reading. That is how we build lifelong readers.

Paige Jaeger (pjaeger@WSWHEBOCES.org) is coordinator for school library services, Washington Saratoga Warren Hamilton Essex BOCES, Saratoga Springs, NY.

